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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority theme: "National and international cooperation for social development": sharing of experiences and practices in social development

International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centres and International Movement ATD Fourth World, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; Dominican Leadership Conference, Elizabeth Seton Federation, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation, School Sisters of Notre Dame and Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; and International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, a non-governmental organization on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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* E/CN.5/2003/1.

** The document was submitted late to the conference services without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, by which the Assembly decided that, if a report is submitted late, the reason should be included in a footnote to the document.

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Sharing of experiences and practices in social development

Importance of sharing experiences and practices

As non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose members are international social service providers, we affirm the importance of the theme "Sharing of experiences and practices in social development". Our members live among persons struggling daily to attain a dignified level of social development. We urge the members of the Commission for Social Development at the forty-first session to strengthen and enhance the capacity of the United Nations to draw from experiences and practices, not only of expert academics and researchers, but also from the experiences and practices of those NGOs who work daily to offset the dehumanizing consequences of poverty, racism, ecological degradation, gender discrimination, and non-inclusive economic policies. We urge the United Nations to learn from the direct shared experiences of persons who have been the victims of inadequate development policies.

United Nations history of sharing best practices

The 1995 Copenhagen Programme of Action highlighted the specific nature of social ills affecting the world and called for cooperation and coordination in practices that alleviate social evils: "*The goals and objectives of social development require continuous efforts to reduce and eliminate major sources of social distress and instability for the family and for society. We pledge to place particular focus on and give priority attention to the fight against the world-wide conditions that pose severe threats to the health, safety, peace, security and well-being of our people ... To this end, coordination and cooperation at the national level and especially at the regional and international levels should be further strengthened.*" (See A/CONF.166/9, chap. I, resolution 1, annex I, para. 20.)

Likewise, the millennium development goals of the United Nations are so specifically stated that they ask for urgent and concrete actions towards their fulfilment. The millennium development goals call for real partnerships on a practical level in order to: "*Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Achieve universal primary education; Promote gender equality and empower women; Reduce child mortality; Improve maternal health; Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Ensure environmental sustainability; Develop a global partnership for development*" (see A/56/326).

Most recently, the Monterrey Consensus opted "*to eradicate poverty, achieve sustained economic growth and promote sustainable development as we advance to a fully inclusive and equitable global economic system*". (See A/CONF.198/11, chap. I, resolution 1, annex, chap. I, para. 1.) To reach this goal, the Monterrey document reiterates dozens of times the importance of the principle of cooperation.

The reality

Despite the rhetoric and all the good intentions, many grass-roots NGOs experience isolation from the direction of national Governments. Indeed, some even observe that their social development work is done at odds with their own

Government. World conferences and United Nations documents seem distant realities in the lives of people whose daily struggles for food and human dignity are lifelong harsh facts, not some statistics for study. Many NGOs are unaware of their Government's desire to partner with them and share their expertise. On the contrary, some note that ongoing political considerations or macroeconomic policies marginalize their very efforts towards social integration and poverty eradication, especially in the realm of women and children. A poignant example of this is the increased phenomena of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation, despite all the attention this topic has received from United Nations resolutions and national policies. We are hopeful that the Commission for Social Development will encourage sharing the experiences of NGOs to change this reality.

Benefits of sharing best practices

Many initiatives, often referred to as "best practices", have been introduced by governmental programmes and NGOs throughout the world. Successful principles, activities, and methodologies of effective implementations ought to be cooperatively shared. It has been observed that when practitioners in the field communicate their expertise, experience and know-how, grass-roots organizations gain from their knowledge.

Members of the NGO Committee on Social Development, through the Subcommittee on Poverty Eradication, are gathering a collection of best practices from their networks across the world. The initiators of this project intend to diffuse the most successful projects through printed and/or electronic means because they believe this will have positive spin-offs. Creative ideas from one project, if shared, may spark innovative approaches applicable in other places.

Best practices should therefore be shared and diffused because they:

1. Promote the use of creative, successful and sustainable solutions, often generated by the people from the area, to resolve problems of poverty and social exclusion.

2. Serve as valuable sources of information for individuals or groups in the process of planning new projects, accessing funding, drafting policy guidelines, etc.

3. Demonstrate the empowering effect within communities when members are involved in the search for solutions to their own problems using local human and material resources.

4. Provide concrete examples that bridge the gaps between researchers and policy makers.

5. Inform Governments, agencies, NGOs, civic leaders, etc., on current needs and further efforts required to scale-up interventions and draft flexible policy guidelines.

6. Showcase the hard work and effective learning achieved through trial and error by grass-roots people affected by poverty.

7. Provide clear and practical indicators of the success or failure of proposals and recommendations put forth by policy makers and Governments.

8. Act as a reality check for bureaucrats, academics and politicians, and encourage them to listen to the voice of citizens who are affected by their policies.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Commission for Social Development urge Governments to:

1. Establish a comprehensive and easily accessible database of information on best practices and lessons learned. Many examples of these have been gathered nationally and internationally by Governments and by NGOs. They need to be made readily accessible as a coherent body of knowledge. The acquired wisdom and effective methodologies of service providers need to be shared widely within the international, national and local communities.

2. Renew efforts to form partnership with NGOs. Many small and underfunded NGOs have great expertise and credibility with people who have suffered poverty and neglect. Their experience can be collected and classified for wide dissemination. Through more effective partnerships, Governments can ensure that resources are well used, and can thus enhance their own reputation in building strong societies of inclusion and democracy.

3. Ask their own departments or ministries to include the specific experiences of NGOs in all reports where such practices are applicable.

4. Include in future governmental policy and decision-making teams, members who have not benefited from current policies or who can point out where difficulties lie in translating theory into practice. These persons can bring innovative and creative solutions.

Conclusion

The United Nations has traditionally encouraged cooperation between all segments of society. Significant benefits can be derived from sharing experiences within Governments and between all levels of civil society. Easy access to the information reported in "best practices" will stimulate groups to replicate the achievements of other developmental partners, facilitate the planning of successful new projects, give visibility to grass-roots groups and inform Governments on ways to improve the socio-economic status of their citizens. The Commission for Social Development should take the lead in promoting the sharing of best practices and the lessons learned in poverty eradication.